

A

S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN THE

Parish Church of *Kelvedon*,

On TUESDAY, JUNE 2d, 1772.

[PRICE SIX-PENCE]

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE

Parish Church of Kewstoke

On TUESDAY, JUNE 22, 1772.

[PRICE SIX-PENCE]

A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN THE

Parish Church of *Kelvedon*,

AT THE

V I S I T A T I O N

OF THE

Rev. Dr. P O W E L L,

On TUESDAY, JUNE 2d, 1772. *K*

By CHRISTOPHER WYVILL, LL.B.
RECTOR of BLACK NOTLEY, in ESSEX.

L O N D O N:

Printed for S. BLADON, in *Paternoster-Row*; and T. PAYNE, at the *Mews Gate*.

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S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE

Parish Church of Aston

AT THE

V I S I T A T I O N



By W. R. L.

OF TUESDAY JUNE 11TH 1851

By CHRISTOPHER WHITE, LL.B.
RECTOR OF ASTON

L O N D O N

Printed for S. HARRIS, in Pall Mall, near the Theatre Royal, Strand.

1851

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S E R M O N.

MATTH. xi. 5.

THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED UNTO THEM.

THE natural powers of mankind seem unable to frame a satisfactory system of Religion. The best philosophers of antiquity, after much pains employed in the search of religious knowledge, confessed the insufficiency of reason, and lamented the obscurity in which the most important truths were involved.

THE being of a God indeed is a truth plainly stamp'd on every object that surrounds us. But even this first principle of Religion is not without considerable difficulties, which the wisest Heathens could never overcome. When they survey'd the manifold miseries of life, they were at a loss to account for the origin of evil; they were strongly tempted to distrust the goodness of God. When they considered the apparent inequality of lots, they saw the just consequences of guilt often suspended, they saw the good and pious sinking under misfortunes

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which

which even their virtues had brought upon them. How to reconcile this constitution of nature with the belief of God's providence, they knew not. How to avoid imputing partiality and injustice to the supreme Being, without supposing the events of life to be governed by fate, or chance, they knew not. This was a most disconsolate situation. For if God be not acknowledged the Moral Governor of the world, his omnipotence and perfect wisdom may be the objects of admiration, but they can serve no valuable purpose of Religion.

BUT the supposition of a Future State presents a solution of these difficulties. There all these inequalities may be set right; there the wicked may receive the punishment justly due to his offences; and the unhappy sufferer in the cause of virtue may there receive an ample compensation. And thus the justice and goodness of God being fully vindicated, the Religion of nature will be a satisfactory Religion. To Christians long accustomed to this idea, it seems an easy supposition. But the proofs of a Future State produced by unassisted Reason, are too precarious to still the fears, or to satisfy the hopes of Mankind. That God is benevolent, may be collected from the Creation; since happiness, though mixed with some degree of pain, is evidently the general portion. That God is not indifferent to Vice and Virtue, may be concluded from their natural tendency; each having that appointed influence on our felicity, which suits our apprehension of justice. Hence this conjecture of Nature, that there will be a Future State, gains some probability; but weakened by so many doubts and diminutions, that it affords a slender support to practical Religion.

FOR if the argument drawn from the divine goodness prove that Death is not the final period of our existence; why is it the extinction of brutes? And yet that mansions are provided, for the future reception of each inferior tribe of animals, seems a conclusion hardly credible. Still less can our hope be grounded on the divine justice.

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For whose life has been so unblemished by guilt, that he dare appeal, not to the mercy, but to the justice of God? From reason we have no security, that he will pardon Sin, and accept Repentance instead of perfect obedience. Nay, were it possible to pass through all the temptations of life, unsullied with the least taint of moral turpitude, we could have no just demand of future happiness; unless upon the whole estimate of our feelings, misery should be preponderant. And even then our claim could strictly extend only to such a retribution of felicity as might equal the weight of our affliction. But the hopes derived from nice speculations on such extraordinary cases are really evanescent. That the justice of God will be tempered with mercy, is indeed a reasonable supposition. God certainly will treat all his creatures with lenity and kindness, as far as may consist with the rules of his Moral Government of the Universe. But in our particular case, what indulgence his invariable rectitude may grant, can only be learned from his own Declaration.

BUT our expectations of a future state perhaps are buoyed up by airy notions of the Soul's native immortality. Alas! on this subject, endless are the difficulties with which thinking persons have been embarrassed. In the natural progress from infancy to manhood, from manhood to absolute decrepitude, the vigour of the soul varies with every corporeal variation. Imperfect organs produce a correspondent imperfection in the mind. Disturb the brain, and coherent thought is destroyed; wound the vitals, and sensation is no more. It is impossible for reason to determine, whether the Soul, thus intimately united with the body, survives its dissolution. If without bodily organs the Soul originally can have no perception, perhaps it cannot perceive when disembodied by death. Notwithstanding the metaphysical arguments drawn from the supposed immateriality of the Soul, this suspicion will return, and can receive a satisfactory answer only from the Christian Religion.

BUT

BUT were these fundamental truths of Religion ever so clearly discoverable by abstract reasoning, the multitude of men could never profit by it. Their narrow education, and their laborious employments disqualify them for speculation. Without the assistance of Revelation, eternal ignorance and superstition would be the doom of far the greatest part of mankind. Every wild enthusiast, every cunning impostor would find them an easy prey; Fables shocking to common sense, doctrines injurious to morality would gain a ready admittance; Idolatry with all its barbarous and obscene rites would universally prevail; the examples of lust and injustice in their fictitious Gods would corrupt the heart; and virtue, the very end and essence of Religion, would be destroyed by the means appointed to preserve it. The philosophers, afraid to stem the torrent, would swim with it, and by complying with every popular superstition, would complete the disgrace of human nature.

SUCH was the state of natural Religion among the most learned and polished nations of antiquity. Such is the state of it, in modern times, where the influence of Christianity has not been felt. Who can contemplate these complicated horrors of Sin and Superstition, without a rising wish for the redemption of mankind? The wish is not in vain. Glad tidings of universal joy have been announced from Heaven. The poor, the ignorant, and the sinful have the Gospel of Salvation preached unto them. And blessed is he who is not offended in Jesus Christ.

- I. THE truth of the Gospel is confirmed by satisfactory proof.
- II. THE purest precepts of morality are there delivered with perspicuity.
- III. AND our Obedience is secured by the strongest sanctions of future

future reward and punishment. It is therefore a Religion adapted to all capacities; it supplies the World with what it evidently wanted, a clear and complete Revelation of the will of God.

I. ONE principal evidence of the truth of Christianity is afforded by prophecy. The leading promises given to our first parents, and to Abraham, plainly declare, that a Redeemer of Mankind should arise. The same intimation is continued by Moses; by later Prophets additional light is thrown on the antient predictions; many peculiar circumstances of this great person's character and history are delineated, and the time of his appearance among the Jews plainly pointed out. Now Jesus commenced his ministry when the completion of that period had raised the expectation of Judæa. Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another? This was the general language of the Jews. But the dignity of the Messiah having been described by the Prophets in figurative terms, the nature of his office was much misunderstood. The deliverance promised by God was a spiritual deliverance; Redemption from the slavery of sin, and the consequent fears of death. But the hopes and expectations of the Jews were altogether carnal. That the Messiah should free them from a foreign yoke, and having subdued their enemies, should sit in glory on the throne of David, these were their best conceptions of his dignity, these were the only blessings they expected from him. Thus prepossessed with the expectation of a temporal Redeemer, the Jews having seen the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes, would have taken Jesus by force, and made him their king. But finding the prospect of grandeur slighted by him, they despised him as a visionary projector of an unnecessary Reformation. Hence the rejection of Christ by the main body of the Jewish Nation. But let the prophetic description of the Messiah be compared with the Gospel History of Jesus, and in the principal features a wonderful correspondence will be found. So striking is the resemblance, that it is more natural to suppose the

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prophecies contain his history, than to believe they have no relation to him. But the prophetic writings had been for many ages in the custody of his enemies. The Jews who preserved the scriptures, by their rejection of Jesus fulfilled them; and thus established their authenticity beyond dispute.

THE destruction of Jerusalem, the dispersion of the Jews, the papal corruptions of Christianity, these were events which human wisdom never could foresee, which artful imposture never would predict; but yet these were events prophetically declared in scripture, that in after ages, the declining faith of Christians might be invigorated by fresh confirmations.

OTHER proofs of our Religion may be drawn from the conduct of its founder and his assistants. How unrepachable is the character of the Apostles! Plain and artless men, equally removed from falsehood and from enthusiasm; after a life of the most disinterested labour in the cause of Religion, they sealed their testimony with their blood. How strongly is the veracity of Jesus himself confirmed by his unambitious deportment; by his simplicity and spotless sanctity of life; by that bright assemblage of virtues, which forbids the least suspicion of fraud or dissimulation.

BUT the proof principally insisted on by Christ himself, is his power of working miracles. Believe me, says he, for the very work's sake. This is an argument adapted to strike the senses, and to excite the attention of the dullest men. By the bare utterance of a word, he gave hearing to the deaf, and sight to the blind, he restored health to the sick and life to the dead. If Mankind can trust their senses, if the report of eye-witnesses who have evidently no interest, no temptation to deceive, may be relied on, the miracles of Jesus are true, and the Gospel stands on a solid foundation. The same miraculous power

power was communicated to his disciples, and exerted by them as it had been exerted by their master, in the most open unsuspicious manner. To this decisive argument they constantly appealed, as the credential seal of their divine commission. And their rapid progress in the conversion of the world, against the joint opposition of the Jewish and Roman government, strongly proves the truth of their pretension. The priest calumniated, the philosopher ridiculed, the politician persecuted in vain. Under every possible disadvantage, against every appearance of human probability, the Gospel prevailed; and a few artless fishermen overcame the vices and prejudices, the power and policy of the world, because the mighty power of God was with them.

II. ARE any doubts remaining? Does any serious and candid examiner desire a farther confirmation of our Religion? It is to be found in the Doctrine itself. If Christianity were, what it is sometimes represented to be, an abstruse metaphysical system, it would be absolutely useless to the bulk of mankind. The interposition of Providence in its favour would appear a waste of miracles, capriciously thrown away to obtain a trifling purpose; to conduct the speculative few to Heaven, while the many, who need assistance most, were left to perish without a guide. But this objection has no foundation in our Religion. The Gospel is not a speculative science to amuse the learned and inquisitive; it is a practical institution to regulate the conduct, and to reform the heart. No studied eloquence, no subtle argumentation, no systematical combination of parts is to be found there, but truth in a simple unaffected dress. In all important matters it is a clear intelligible Revelation. The instructions of Jesus are accommodated to the meanest understandings; they are familiarly expressed, and rise naturally out of the divine Instructor's present circumstances. But since our duties vary with our situations, and the situations in which we are placed, are infinitely

nitely diversified; to have drawn the line of duty precisely in every case, would have distracted us with their endless multiplicity. To avoid this evil, our Religion describes a general scheme of duty. The precepts of the Gospel are commonly conveyed in the easy vehicle of parables; leaving to the conscience of each individual that obvious application, Go, and do likewise. But where our duty is more directly insisted on, it is always explained clearly and concisely. Attention with an honest and good heart is all the preparation required in the Disciple; and with these qualifications no man of common understanding can peruse the Gospel, without discerning clearly the conditions of Salvation. This is the first essential requisite in a divine Revelation.

LET then the precepts themselves be considered, and in this view the Gospel will be found worthy its high origin. The grosser acts of intemperance, injustice, and profaneness are there condemned with just severity. Crimes of such enormity are not to be so much as once named among Christians. But even the lighter offences, the first essays of infant Sin are strictly forbidden. For every levity of idle speech, for every hasty fall of anger, for every indulgence of a lascivious look, we must give an account at the day of judgement. We must guard against the rise of wicked thoughts in the heart; we must stifle Sin in its first conception. Nay, to prevent any relaxation of our own vigilance, or any remissness in those who may observe our conduct, we must even abstain from all appearance of evil, in actions otherwise indifferent. We are taught to pray for pardon of our offences, only as we forgive those who have offended us. We are commanded to bless our persecutors, and to love even our enemies. There is no limit assigned to our benevolence; but according to our ability we must be always willing to serve our fellow-creatures by every kind and humane office. We must be ever truly sensible of our entire dependence on God; ever grateful for the blessings we enjoy, and in all the changes of life still patiently resigned to the will of our Almighty Governor.

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IN the practice of these duties we must endeavour to go on from strength to strength, advancing continually in Christian Virtue, and still more completely subduing all our rebellious passions. If our obedience to God be thus sincere, we are assured, he will not be extreme to mark the casual slips of human infirmity. Our repentance will be accepted, our earnest prayers for pardon and assistance will be granted, and thus instead of being disabled by an accidental fall, we shall rise with new vigour.

III. To animate the Christian in these labours of the Soul, the Gospel holds forth a reward of inestimable value: eternal life to the virtuous, the gift of God through Jesus Christ. An happy immortality! What tongue can express, what imagination can conceive *his* joy, *his* never-ceasing rapture, to whom the sovereign judge shall decree this glorious prize! Still more strongly to secure the Christian's obedience, the penalty of eternal destruction is denounced on the impenitent transgressor, in terms so emphatically severe, that if the proofs of the Gospel formed ever so slight a probability, it would be madness, for the poor, transient, unsatisfactory pleasures of Sin, to hazard a punishment so inconceivably great. But to cut off all doubts of our future existence, Jesus rose again, the first born of the dead; and thus gave a decisive experimental proof of that important doctrine, whose uncertainty had hitherto perplexed the wisest of mankind.

THUS complete and absolute in all its parts is the Gospel of Christ. Though the external evidences of it be plain and convincing to common understandings, yet are they proof against the strictest examination of incredulous philosophy. Though the doctrines of it be calculated for the instruction of the poor and illiterate, they exhibit, and with all the hopes and terrors of eternity enforce, a sublime morality,

morality, the steady observance of which would exalt our character to the summit of perfection.

If in many instances this happy effect hath not appeared among Christians, the failure is not owing to the imperfection of our Religion, but to our misapprehension of its nature. As faith is the root productive of virtue, so virtue is the fruit, without which barren faith is of no value. The peculiar praise of the Christian is, to be zealous of good works. But a false zeal for speculative notions has often defeated the main end of the Gospel. For plain as the Scriptures are in necessary doctrines, they are not without many passages of doubtful interpretation. But the essentials of faith and practice are not affected by these obscurities; and if Christians had humbly acquiesced in the latitude of Scripture, without pretending to define what God had purposely left indefinite, the Spirit of our Religion had never evaporated in mischievous disputes. But the fatal curiosity of mankind, not content with the beautiful simplicity of the Gospel, longed to be wise above what is written. Contests soon arose concerning subjects the most abstruse and incomprehensible. The teachers of Christianity had scarcely gained an establishment in the world, when the rage of Definition seized them. A furious zeal for opinions conceived in unscriptural language possessed the Nicene Council; and the decisions of that assembly on the metaphysical nature of God, were enforced by very uncharitable means. The consequence was perpetual animosity, and as each side had power, alternate retaliation. As Learning and Christian Charity declined, these intricate controversies prevailed, extending far and wide into every province of Religion; till at last the Gospel was wholly over-run with the thorns and briars of scholastic Theology. Hence the stress unnaturally laid on the right acceptance of obscure and disputable doctrines. Hence the neglect of the more momentous truths

truths of the Gospel, and the decay of practical Religion. The seed is good, but the thorns and briars choke it.

To this cause likewise the rejection of Christianity by learned and virtuous Infidels may be reasonably ascribed. The evidences by which it is confirmed have seldom been deemed incompetent. Few have doubted, but the divine providence possibly might interpose in a miraculous manner, to authenticate an extraordinary Revelation. Few have doubted but the truth of miracles, like that of any other historical fact, might be indisputably proved by testimony. Sceptics who have entertained these unreasonable doubts, have not really hurt Christianity; but by exciting the defenders of it more closely to examine the foundation of their faith, the strength and stability of it have been more clearly evinced. But our Religion has been chiefly discredited by our own misconduct. The fierce disputes, the cruel persecutions with which the annals of the Church abound, have generated in many minds prejudices unfavourable to the Gospel of Peace. The doctrines so uncharitably maintained, as the sum and substance of Religion, have been, for the most part, little better than unintelligible jargon. Christianity thus misrepresented has been condemned for faults not its own. The disgust produced by the bigotry of our conduct, has been increased by the absurdity of our systems; and as knowledge advanced, these unhappy prejudices have been gradually hardened into confirmed Infidelity.

For the cure of these evils the first and most effectual remedy seems to be, to return to the simplicity of the Gospel. Should our amiable Religion appear in its native beauty, unimpaired by artificial disguise, it would captivate all hearts, and secure universal Love and Admiration. This were a noble application of our Learning; this were indeed the proper use of our theological improvements; to correct the mistakes of superstitious ages, and to pare away the excrescences of Religion. In
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this pious and necessary work much was done by the Renunciation of Popery; but something still remains to be done. The reliques of antient Superstition must be swept off, the doctrines of men must be cleared away, before the plan of Gospel purity and freedom can be restored. The task of Reformation is always arduous, but it is honourable too. Injured truth and sincerity demand the attempt. Even the temper of the nation, more candid and liberal than in the days of Cranmer, seems to invite it. Many Christians are now aware, that to insist on knotty points of School Divinity, is not to preach the Gospel to the poor. Though Righteousness and Truth have indeed come down from Heaven, the blessing is found to be incomplete, till Peace and Christian Zeal have kissed each other. Treat then the determinations of Synods, on disputable matters, as they ought to be treated, as the fallible conjectures of learned men; and the rancour of polemical theology, that bane of the Christian Religion, will be extinguished. Discourage scholastic subtlety, and the attention of Christians will be turned, where it ought always to be fixed, on the essential truths and indisputable duties of the Gospel. Renounce human additions to the faith, remove the stumbling-blocks so offensive to the followers of Natural Religion, and Christianity will soon become, what it was intended to be, the Religion of Mankind.

THE END.

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